

***COLUMBUS COUNTY***  
***LOCAL COORDINATED***  
***HUMAN SERVICES***  
***TRANSPORTATION PLAN***



*Prepared with the assistance of the  
Cape Fear Area Rural Transportation Planning Organization  
Wilmington, North Carolina*

*March 26, 2009*

## **I. Introduction**

On Tuesday, February 3, 2009 the Cape Fear Area Rural Planning Organization (RPO) in collaboration with the North Carolina Department of Transportation's (NCDOT) Public Transportation Division (PTD) held a Transportation Community Involvement Planning forum at the Southeastern Community College Training Center in Whiteville. Approximately fifty people representing human service agencies, the business community, the medical community, the community college, local government, and citizens/consumers were invited to the meeting. In addition, notice of the meeting ran in the local newspapers.

In addition, surveys were mailed to all the invitees along with the invitations. Six people completed and returned them. Their responses generally coincided with responses gathered at the February 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting.

Nine (9) people attended the meeting. They provided a good representation of the target groups. The meeting lasted about 2 hours. At the conclusion of the meeting, some of the meeting attendees were asked to participate in a follow-up meeting to review the results of the meeting and assist with planning for available grants.

This plan:

- Discusses the planning meeting in some detail;
- Identifies and prioritizes gaps or barriers to service; and
- Identifies strategies, activities and/or projects to address the identified gaps

## **II. February 5<sup>th</sup> Planning Meeting**

**Introduction:** Mr. Don Eggert, Director of the Cape Fear Area Rural Planning Organization opened the meeting with welcoming remarks and asked each attendee to identify themselves and their interest in transportation.

**Overview:** Mr. Eggert was also the meeting’s facilitator. He introduced Ms. Tamra Shaw, with NCDOT’s Public Transportation Division (PTD), who then discussed the overall concept of the Local Coordinated Plan.

**Assessment of available resources:** Following the overview Ms. Shaw provided information relating to the Community Involvement Planning process, the SAFETEA-LU grants available (JARC, New Freedoms, and Elderly/Disabled), and an assessment of available transportation resources.

**Assessment of transportation needs of the target population:** The facilitator, Mr. Eggert, then asked the group to brainstorm issues related to transportation needs in the county. Specifically, the following question was posed to the group:

**“What are the barriers to providing adequate  
Transportation in Columbus County?”**

He gave each attendee an index card and asked them to list the various issues or concerns that came to mind. He then asked each attendee to give one of their concerns. The issues were then listed on poster paper and put on the wall. Following that, each attendee was given stars and asked to vote for those issues they thought were “most critical”

### **III. Gaps or Barriers to Service**

The following were the issues identified in the process

#### ***A. MOST CRITICAL NEEDS OR ISSUES***

The followed issues or needs were identified by the group at the February 3rd meeting as most critical of all the needs identified at the meeting:

- **Need for additional funds for:**
  - >Medical transportation (especially older adults)

>Unemployed job seekers

- **Weekend Service**-The need for weekend transportation service was identified as a critical need. There is no public transportation available for those that may need to take care of basic needs such a grocery shopping or getting prescriptions at the drug store or transportation to/from employment
- **Access To/From Fair Bluff Area** –Fixed route service connecting Whiteville (including the community college and the hospital) was identified as a critical need
- **Transportation for job-seekers**-Many unemployed persons are also transportation disadvantaged, i.e. they lack a way to get to/from job interviews, the Employment Security Commission, etc. Existing services don't meet those needs.
- **Vouchers for Transportation**-Funding for those passengers who do not qualify for Medicaid was identified as a critical need. Riders who “fall through the cracks” are very often not able to afford the transportation service offered by the county's public transportation service.

***B. OTHER NEEDS OR ISSUES***

- **Need for dedicated handicapped access transportation**-especially for the “rehab” program.
- **The need for a fixed route connecting population centers**–The need for a fixed route connecting the major population centers including the hospital and the community college was identified.

- **Transportation for 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> Shift work**-Transportation to/from employment for non-traditional work hours is very limited to non-existent.
- **Free or subsidized transportation for college students**
- **Reasonable medical-related transportation**-Often those with minor health issues use emergency medical transportation (i.e. ambulances) for transportation to the emergency room when they do not need such transportation.
- **Need for increased marketing**-An increase in marketing is needed to let the public know of the availability of existing services. Frequently the public (and some resource agencies) are not aware of transportation services in the county.
- **Different fee structure** (Whiteville vs. out of Whiteville)—Columbus Transportation System’s fares are based on the origin and destination of the trip. Currently, if one starts the trip within the Whiteville city limits the fare is \$3 one-way. Otherwise it’s \$8 one way. This does not seem fair to many riders.
- **Upgrade Communications**- Improve radio communication within the county to eliminate “dead spots”

Conclusion:-The most critical needs identified were additional funding for medical transportation and unemployed job seekers, transportation to/from the Fair Bluff area, and Transportation vouchers for those that “fall through the cracks”,

#### **IV. Strategies, activities and/or projects to address the identified gaps**

1. **Establish a network of vendors for off-peak hours**- A network of private vendors should be established to meet the transportation needs during “off peak” (i.e. weekends, late nights, etc.) when the county’s system is not available. Implementation priority: High

2. **Provide transportation at no cost to community college students**-Under the present fee structure, using the existing transportation system on a daily basis for rides to/from the community college could cost a student \$80 per week. This seems to be an excessive amount of money for a student with limited income. Implementation priority: Medium
3. **Establish a fixed route in the immediate Whiteville area**-There appears to be a need for a fixed route connecting the hospital, downtown, the community college, Wal-Mart and major multi-family residential areas. Implementation priority: High
4. **Provide public transportation to the entire county at a minimum fee**-Explore the potential for providing transportation to the entire county. Implementation priority: Medium
5. **Provide no cost non-emergency medical transportation**-This would eliminate abuse of the existing emergency transportation system with “non-critical” transporting of person with minor non-emergency health needs. Implementation priority: High
6. **Connect all the major population centers with a fixed route system**-Explore the potential for connecting Whiteville, Lake Waccamaw, Tabor City, Fair Bluff, and Chadbourn. Implementation priority: Medium
7. **Establish a voucher program** Establish a flexible voucher system with use of a private provider. Implementation priority: High

## **V. Additional Information**

- A. **Basic Population and Demographic Information**- In 2007 Columbus County had an estimated population of 54,460. This is a decrease from the 2000 US Census population of 57,749. The county has 954 square miles in size, making it one

of the largest in the state. Due to its size and population, aside from Whiteville, the population is relatively scattered throughout the county.

Maps depicting poverty, persons with disability and the age distribution are attached as a part of the appendix.

**B. Transportation Providers in Columbus County-**There are three known transportation providers in Columbus County. They are:

- **Columbus County Transportation-**Provides low-cost, reliable public transportation for qualifying residents of Columbus County. Telephone 910-641-3929
- **Diamond Cab Company-**Provides a taxi cab service to Whiteville and central Columbus County. Telephone 910-770-2307
- **Loris Taxi-**Provides a taxi cab service to Tabor City and surrounding Columbus County. Telephone 843-756-2200

# APPENDIX

- **County Map**
- **Invitation letter**
- **February 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting agenda**
- **Mailing labels of invitees**
- **Attendee “sign in” sheet**
- **News Release**
- **Newspaper Advertisement**
- **Persons 60 & Over By Census Tract**
- **Poverty By Census Tract**
- **Disability by Census Tract**

